

Chapter 1: Chapter One

Scene Song: “Last Christmas” ~ Wham!

December had reached Pleroma, though in its own strange, softened way. The morning sky over Pelmont was bright but mostly clouded over, a pale silver-white light stretching across the horizon instead of the usual blazing gold. The ocean was restless but beautiful, the waves rolling in under a veil of drifting gray, and the air carried a cold bite that should’ve been brutal at thirty degrees, but somehow wasn’t. In Pleroma, even winter had gentler hands. It was cold, yes, but not cruel. Crisp instead of vicious. Sharp, but never punishing.

Inside his beach house, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal was dead asleep upstairs in his bed, buried in sheets, one arm flung over his head, platinum hair mussed only slightly in a way that would’ve irritated him deeply if he’d been awake to see it. He wore lightweight black sleep pants and a long-sleeved black pullover shirt, and at exactly eight in the morning, he stirred awake. He blinked once, then again. Then slowly sat up in bed with a quiet exhale, rubbing one hand over his face and eyes before stretching with a faint little wince in his shoulders. For a few seconds, he was still caught in that soft, drowsy space between sleep and waking, his body heavy, his mind slow. Then he looked toward the window and froze. His eyes widened. The beach in front of his house—his bright, clean stretch of white sand and glittering shore—was covered in snow, not just dusted, *covered*.

The whole world outside looked wrapped in cotton. The palm trees wore soft white along their fronds. The dunes were smoothed over in pale drifts. The shoreline itself looked half-dreamed, strange and beautiful and almost unreal with snow spread all across it under the dim winter light. And from the sky above, medium-sized flakes still came down in a steady fall, drifting and swirling over the beach and sea like heaven itself had decided to do something absurd. Jimmy stared.

“What the fuck?” he exclaimed.

The words flew out of him in pure shock. He threw the covers back immediately and got out of bed so fast he nearly stumbled, caught himself, then hurried out of the room with all the startled urgency of somebody who thought if he didn’t move quickly enough, the whole sight might vanish. He rushed down the stairs in his black sleep clothes, grabbed the front door, yanked it open, and stepped outside. Cold air hit his face. Jimmy stopped on the porch. Snow was everywhere, across the beach, along the path, and resting on the porch rails. There was snow collecting in soft ridges at the edge of the stairs, and overhead the snow kept falling in those beautiful, lazy, medium-sized flakes, thick enough to be magical, light enough to be mesmerizing. Jimmy stepped down off the porch and looked up into it, his whole face alive now, and then he laughed, not his sharp little amused laugh, not his cocky one. This was brighter than that—giddy, open, boyish, almost disbelieving.

He held one hand out in front of himself and watched the snowflakes land against his palm, melting almost instantly against his skin. His smile widened, and a soft, astonished little laugh

slipped out of him again, like he couldn't quite help it. Next door, Cathy stood on her front porch with a cup of coffee cradled between both hands. She had clearly been out there for at least a minute already, watching the snowfall in the quiet, and now she was watching Jimmy instead. A faint smile touched her mouth.

"You're acting as if you've never seen snow before."

Jimmy looked over at her and laughed again before starting across the short distance between their houses, still glancing upward at the sky every few steps like he didn't trust it to keep happening unless he checked.

"Of course I've seen snow before," he replied. "I'm Scottish, not fuckin' tropical."

That made Cathy smile a little more. Jimmy came to a stop near the edge of her porch, then looked back out at the beach, his expression shifting. Softer now. More thoughtful.

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple" ~ 28 Years Later – The Bone Temple Soundtrack

"But..." he said, quieter, "not after."

Cathy's eyes moved to him more fully. Jimmy kept looking out at the white-covered shore.

"Down on Earth, after the Rage Virus took over the Highlands..." He shrugged faintly. "For some reason, I never saw it again. Not once. Everything got colder in every way that mattered, but snow itself just...stopped."

He let out a brief little huff through his nose, almost a laugh, but without any real humor in it.

"That's some sinister irony right there," he added.

The snow kept falling around them, light and steady. Jimmy stared out at it for a few seconds longer, and when he spoke again, his voice dropped almost against his will, as if the memory had slipped loose before he could put armor over it.

"Seeing snow was always one of the things I loved as a child," he admitted.

He said it as if he hated giving the sentence air, as if the words themselves annoyed him. Cathy stayed quiet. Jimmy's eyes remained fixed on the beach, but it was clear he wasn't seeing the beach anymore. He was somewhere else.

"*Malcolm*," he said, and there was something deliberate in it, something hard and distancing in the use of the name alone. "Malcolm used to say snow was evil. Said it was some satanic physical manifestation of cold-heartedness. Said it was God's direct punishment or else proof the world had gone emotionally rotten and wanted to turn people into walkin' ice statues of apathy."

Cathy's brows knitted slightly. Jimmy gave the faintest shake of his head, still staring ahead.

"He wouldn't let me or my sisters play in it, ever," he said as his mouth tightened. "Even when every other child out there was runnin' around in it, and throwin' it like little lunatics. I wanted to."

He paused.

"But I never got to," he added almost softly.

For a second, his face changed. It was small, but it happened. The bravado loosened. The hardness thinned. And what came through was not Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, not the glittering cult figure, not the swaggering menace in chains and rings and platinum hair—just the boy. Just the child who had stood at windows watching other children have things he'd been told were wicked. Cathy looked at him with open sympathy then. She stepped down one porch step, reached over, and briefly touched his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "For all of it. For what you went through with your father."

That touch—and those words—snapped something back into place. Jimmy glanced at her, and the softness in his face shifted immediately beneath something more familiar: the faint frown, the half-smile, the quick reassembly of style and hardness over the wound. He gave a little shrug.

"Yeah, well," he said, "Malcolm was a deeply dramatic fuckin' bastard with a grievance against joy. What else is new?"

Cathy let out the slightest breath of a laugh. Jimmy's half-smile sharpened a little more now, the armor fully returning.

"I'm fine now," he said. "I'm here, I'm redeemed, I wear expensive shite, and live on a beach in the afterlife. I've landed on my feet better than he ever did."

That was more like him. Cathy studied him for a moment, knowing full well what he was doing—covering himself back over after letting something real slip through—but she let him have it. Instead, she lifted her coffee slightly and glanced toward his house.

"You ready for Xmas?" she asked. "Because I couldn't help noticing you haven't decorated anything yet."

Jimmy followed her gaze for only half a second before looking away. His mouth flattened. Then he gave a small scoff.

"No," he said shortly. "I'm not doin' all that."

Cathy raised a brow. Jimmy took a step backward already, the retreat obvious.

"All the tinsel and lights and forced fuckin' cheer?" he said. "No, thanks. The whole thing looks like a craft store had a nervous fuckin' breakdown."

Cathy's eyes narrowed just slightly.

Jimmy gave her a quick, dismissive little smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You enjoy it, though," he added. "Decorate your house, drink your coffee, become Queen of the Snow Porch. I'll support you from a distance."

And with that, he turned and started back toward his own house before Cathy could ask anything else. It was too quick, too abrupt, too clean a departure to be casual. Cathy stood still on her porch, coffee in hand, watching him go with a faintly suspicious look on her face as snow continued to drift softly down around them. Jimmy reached his door, went inside, and shut it behind him. The beach stayed white. The snow kept falling. And Cathy, still standing there in the cold, had the distinct feeling that Jimmy Crystal had just run from more than a conversation.

Scene Song: "The Bone Temple" ~ 28 Years Later – The Bone Temple Soundtrack

At Sasha's house, the kitchen was warm with the smell of fresh coffee and the soft domestic quiet of an early winter morning. Outside, the strange Pelmont snowfall still drifted down in a steady silver-white veil, visible through the window above the sink. The world beyond the glass looked muted and soft, bright but subdued under the mostly cloudy sky. Inside, Sasha was already dressed for the day, practical but put together as always. She had on a lightweight warm hat and a pea coat that was enough for the weather without turning the whole outing into some Arctic expedition. She stood at the counter fixing herself a cup of coffee, one hand around the mug, the other reaching for the sugar, her thoughts already half on the shopping trip ahead. That was when the kitchen door opened, and Remmick came in. He stepped inside with snow still caught lightly on the shoulders of his coat, shut the door behind him, and looked over at her.

"Good morning," he said in that easy Southern North Carolina drawl of his, warm and low and lived-in.

Sasha smiled at once.

"Good morning."

Remmick moved farther into the kitchen, taking off his gloves.

"You ready to go?"

Sasha nodded, lifting her mug.

"Almost. I just want to go next door and ask Jimmy if he wants to come."

That made Remmick glance faintly toward the living room before looking back at her.

"He isn't here?"

Sasha frowned a little.

“No, and that’s weird.”

Remmick’s brows drew together slightly.

“Maybe he’s sick or somethin’?”

“I don’t know.” Sasha shook her head. “But he’s always here by now. Every morning, without fail—cereal, Teletubbies, then Power Rangers, then Raven if he decides he’s feeling especially cultured.” She lightly smiled, but it faded quickly. “He wasn’t here this morning.”

Remmick watched her for a beat, then nodded once.

“Then let’s go see.”

She looked at him.

“You’ll come with me?”

He gave her a look like the answer should’ve been obvious.

“Yeah.”

Sasha set her mug down, pulled on her coat fully, and after one last suspicious glance toward the quiet next door, headed for the door with Remmick right behind her.

Jimmy’s house was dimmer than it should’ve been. That was the first thing Sasha noticed when she let them in with her key. The second was that the usual easy feel of the place wasn’t there. It wasn’t trashed. Nothing was wrong in any obvious way. The furniture was still in place, everything clean, everything exactly where it ought to be. But the curtains were drawn shut over the windows, blocking out the snow-bright morning and leaving the living room under a dull, closed-in half-darkness that felt wrong for the hour. On the sofa, Jimmy was sprawled out watching Teletubbies.

He had one leg stretched along the cushions, one bent slightly, a bowl of cereal in his hand, and his spoon moving in slow, automatic little motions. He was dressed now, fully put together the way he always was—tracksuit, chains, rings, hair laid perfect, every inch of him polished into Sir Lord readiness—but something about the whole picture felt off. Not because of what he was doing. Because of how still he was while doing it. Sasha frowned as she and Remmick stepped in more.

“Jimmy?”

Jimmy glanced at her with the slightest turn of his head. Then back at the television.

“What?”

Sasha stopped near the sofa.

“What happened?”

That got a brief little shake of his head.

“The hell d’you mean, what happened?”

Sasha folded her arms.

“You always come to my house every morning for cereal and your morning shows. You weren’t there.”

Jimmy shrugged without taking his eyes off the TV.

“Didn’t feel like it this morning.”

The answer came too flat, too quick. Remmick, standing a little behind Sasha, faintly frowned.

“You always go over there, though,” Remmick said, “every mornin’. That’s your routine.”

Jimmy scooped up another spoonful of cereal, still staring straight ahead.

“Yeah, well,” Jimmy said, his voice lazy in a way that didn’t sound natural on him, “this mornin’ I felt like remainin’ on my own fuckin’ sofa in my own house and watchin’ my own telly like a civilized man. Shocking development, I know.”

Sasha’s eyes stayed on him. Something was wrong. She couldn’t name it yet, but it was there in the room with them, under the dimness, under the sarcasm, under the way he kept refusing to fully look at either of them. She stepped a little closer.

“Well, we’re going shopping for Xmas decorations. Me, Remmick, Kellie, Ian, Samson. Trees, lights, ornaments, all of it. Come with us.”

Jimmy let out a sigh. It slipped out of him before he could stop it, low and tired and full of something too heavy to belong in such an ordinary moment. Sasha caught it instantly. So did Remmick. Jimmy’s jaw tightened.

“No.”

Sasha blinked.

“No?”

He finally turned his head and looked at her with a faint frown.

“I said no.”

“Why?”

Something in him snapped. Not explosively. Not all at once, but sharply enough to change the whole air in the room.

“Because I don’t want to go get a bunch of fuckin’ decorations, Sasha,” Jimmy shot back, the words coming harder now. “I don’t want fuckin’ tinsel, I don’t want lights, I don’t want some

tragic little fuckin' tree dragged into my house to stand there lookin' festive and judgmental, and I sure as shite don't want to spend the day wanderin' around shops while everybody loses their fuckin' minds over ornaments."

Sasha stared at him. Remmick's eyes narrowed. Jimmy turned his attention back to the TV, jaw set.

"So do me a favor and leave me the fuck alone," Jimmy added.

But now Sasha was really looking at the closed curtains, at the darkened room, at the way he was holding the cereal bowl too tightly, at the tension pulled all through him like a wire. Her voice softened.

"Jimmy...what's wrong?"

The spoon slammed down into the bowl with a sharp clank. The sound cracked through the room. Jimmy turned his head fully then and looked at her. It was that *stare*, that cold, flat, piercing Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal stare—the one that in another life had made people freeze where they stood. The one from the old days. The one that carried the memory of a man who had once used stillness like a blade. When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous.

"Sasha, if you do not get the *fuck* out of my face and leave me the *fuck* alone," he said, "I swear upon *everything* in this fuckin' room, I'll fuckin' *throw* you out myself."

Sasha went still. Remmick stepped in at once, protective instinct flaring hot and immediate.

"Now hold on," Remmick snapped, his own voice hardening. "That shitty attitude isn't welcome, Jimmy. We're just trying to be nice and invite you to come. You're *family*."

Jimmy didn't blink. Remmick took one step forward, jaw tight. Jimmy's eyes flicked to him, expression unreadable. For one charged second, it seemed like the room might tilt into something worse. Then Remmick scoffed, looked at Sasha, and glanced back slightly toward the door.

"Forget it, Sasha, come on. Let's go," Remmick said.

Sasha didn't move right away. She was still staring at Jimmy, not angry, not exactly, more hurt than that, *disappointed*, confused. He'd snapped at her before, sure. Jimmy was Jimmy. He had moods, sharp edges, bratty arrogance, and theatrical outbursts. But this felt *different*. *Colder*. More *deliberate*. As if he *wanted* the damage done, Jimmy looked away first, picked up his spoon again, took another bite of cereal, and pretended they were already gone. The television kept playing. Bright, childish colors moved over the screen. Tinky Winky waddled past in the background while the room sat heavy with tension. Sasha swallowed once, then turned and went with Remmick toward the door. They left without another word. The front door opened and closed, and silence settled back over the living room. Jimmy sat there very still. The spoon remained in his hand, but he didn't lift it again. After a few seconds, his gaze dropped slowly to the bowl in his lap, and a deep frown pulled at his mouth. The hardness in his face loosened, just a little, enough for the guilt to show.

He stared down at the cereal like he couldn't quite make himself look anywhere else. Then, slowly, his eyes lifted—not toward the television, not toward the doorway Sasha had just gone through, but back toward the tightly shut curtains over the windows. The snowlight pushed faintly around their edges, soft white, cold white, persistent. Jimmy went completely still, and for a moment, looking at him there in the half-dark with the children's show still murmuring in the background, it became clear that whatever had gotten into him that morning had not come with the snow; the snow had only uncovered it.

Chapter 2: Chapter Two

Scene Song: “The Bone Temple” ~ 28 Years Later - The Bone Temple Soundtrack

Later that day, Sasha’s living room glowed with Xmas. The whole room had been transformed into something warm and soft and deeply lived-in. The tree stood tall near the wide front windows, full and green and lit all over in little golden-white lights that made the ornaments gleam softly from every angle. Red, gold, and silver ornaments caught the light whenever the branches moved faintly from the heat shifting through the house. There was garland twined along the mantle, little strands of lights looped carefully around the windows, and the fireplace itself crackled with steady orange warmth, its light dancing along the walls and across the polished floor.

Above it, Sasha was standing on a small step stool, hanging up stockings one by one with focused care. The room smelled like pine, cinnamon, and firewood. It felt like comfort, it felt like safety. It felt like everything Jimmy had not been allowed to have. Sasha had just adjusted one stocking and reached for the next when she heard the quiet sound of someone coming into the room. She looked over. Jimmy was standing at the edge of the living room. He’d come in slowly, almost cautiously, and for a second, he just stood there staring. His eyes widened a little, not dramatically, just enough, enough for the awe to show. The tree lights reflected faintly in his bright blue eyes, and for one brief moment, he looked younger than usual—not childish exactly, but open in a way he often wasn’t unless he forgot to guard himself. His gaze moved over the stockings, the garland, the soft firelight, the ornaments, and the tree. It all seemed to catch him off guard, not because it was too much, but because it was *beautiful*. He stepped farther into the room, drawn toward the tree almost without thinking. His movements had none of his usual swagger at first. No performance. No bounce. Just a strange, quiet pull. He stopped beside the lit branches and gently reached out, brushing his fingers against one of them. And then—Malcolm’s voice, not in the room, in his head—clear, sharp, and rotten with doctrine.

“Look at your aunt’s house, Jimmy—it’s not a home, it’s a glowing cage of vanity. Every one of those twinkling bulbs around the window is a ‘Lying Light’ of Lucifer, a neon snare meant to mimic the glory of God with the cheap hum of electricity and glass. You see a decorated tree, but I see a ‘Spiritual Antenna’ tuned to the frequencies of the Pit, its branches heavy with the trinkets of Mammon to distract you from the stark, cold reality of the Cross.

This ‘charity’ the world babbles about is a poison; it’s not the true godly form of charity. They aren’t giving gifts; they are trading bribes for their own salvation, trying to buy God’s favor with cardboard boxes and colored paper. Come on, let’s go home and sit in the holy dark, for a man who needs a string of plastic lights to find his way is a man whose soul is already blind.”

Jimmy’s whole face changed. He shut his eyes tight with a deep frown, jaw tensing hard, like he was physically trying to crush the sound of Malcolm’s voice before it could spread any farther through him. His hand dropped away from the branch. For a moment, he just stood there breathing through his nose, every muscle in him pulled taut with that old invisible fight. Then he opened his eyes again and looked over at Sasha. The guilt on his face was immediate, quiet,

raw. She had stepped down from the stool by then, one hand still resting on a stocking, and was watching him carefully, not yet sure what version of Jimmy she was about to get. The one from this morning was still sitting between them. Jimmy crossed the room toward her, no flourish, no joke. When he reached her, he slipped both arms around her and hugged her warmly, resting there for a second with his eyes briefly closed and a faint frown still on his face. Sasha stilled in surprise. She didn't pull away, but she also didn't fully soften at first. Not yet. Not until she understood what this was. Jimmy let her go after a moment, and when she turned to face him, his expression was softer than usual. Almost boyish. The edges gone out of him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The words came low, not theatrical, not polished, just sincere.

"I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you this morning." He gave the slightest shake of his head. "I didn't mean that shite. I'd never, ever do anything violent to you."

Then, because he was still Jimmy and sincerity never sat on him without some attempt to break the tension, he added:

"Remmick, *maybe*, but never you."

A brief little laugh slipped out of him, small, light, trying. Sasha's brow lifted despite herself. Jimmy's smile flickered, then faded again.

"But no, I mean it," he said. "I felt like absolute shite after you left. I hated how I talked to you." His eyes moved over her face, earnest now. "I'm sorry, Sasha. Really."

She studied him for a long second, brow raised, faint frown still there. Then she asked quietly:

"What made you snap like that?"

Jimmy let out a slow sigh. His eyes dropped. He looked down and away from her, briefly closing them again while a faint frown settled over his face. Then he reached for her hand.

"Come over and sit with me," he said.

He led her over to the sofa, and they sat down together in the firelit glow of the room while the tree lights shimmered softly nearby. For a second, Jimmy didn't say anything. He just sat there, staring at the floor like he was deciding how much of this he could stand to drag into the open. Finally, he spoke.

"Growing up," he said, "Christmas *wasn't...this*."

His eyes flicked briefly around the room—the tree, the mantle, the stockings, the fire.

"Not anything like this," he added.

Sasha stayed quiet and let him go on.

"Malcolm hated it. He hated the decorations, hated the lights, hated the tree, hated gifts, hated people bein' cheerful over anything that wasn't misery wrapped in scripture." Jimmy's mouth

twisted faintly. “He said all of it was evil; he said decorations were vanity. He said snow was wicked, said it was all false light, false joy, false charity. He said the world only liked Christmas because it gave people permission to be spiritually blind in prettier colors.”

He gave a brief, humorless little laugh and looked down at his hands.

“So when I see snow now...or houses all decorated up like this...” He exhaled slowly. “It brings all that shite back, not because I believe it, not really—not now—but because he drilled it into me so deeply that some part of my mind still reacts before the rest of me can catch up.”

His fingers tightened together slightly.

“Like this mornin’.”

Sasha’s face softened. Jimmy kept going, quieter now.

“I saw the snow, and then I saw all this in my head—lights, decorations, the whole season—and all I could hear was him. All his rotten little speeches about evil and punishment and cold-heartedness and false joy.” He swallowed once. “And I know it’s insane. I know it is.”

He looked down, then let out a light, brief laugh under his breath, almost a whisper.

“Malcolm and even the Rage Virus itself...” He shook his head faintly. “It all fucked up my mind horribly, I know.”

At that, Sasha immediately took both his hands in hers. Jimmy’s eyes lifted to her. They were a little glassy now, not crying, but close enough for the ache to show.

“No,” Sasha said gently, firmly. “You’re not fucked up in the mind.”

Jimmy looked at her, tired and uncertain.

“You’re traumatized,” she continued, “deeply, heavily traumatized. There’s a difference. Trauma plants things in people. It wires fear into places it doesn’t belong and then makes the body and mind react like the danger is still happening, even when it isn’t.”

She squeezed his hands.

“That doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with who you are. It means terrible things were done to you, terrible things were poured into you, and some of it is still trying to echo.”

Jimmy’s mouth tightened slightly. He listened hard, like he needed every word to land properly. Sasha’s voice softened even more.

“You grew up being told beauty was evil. Joy was evil. Snow was evil. Lights were evil. Warmth was evil. You were taught to distrust comfort and happiness, and then the Rage Virus came and made everything even worse. Of course, certain things still hit old bruises in your mind. That doesn’t make you broken beyond repair.” She gave his hands another gentle squeeze. “It just means healing is still happening.”

Jimmy looked down for a second, then back at her. His eyes shone a little more now. Sasha smiled faintly.

“And you’re not doing it alone.”

That made something in his face shift, small, but real.

“We’ll get through it together,” she said. “Me, you, everybody who loves you here. You don’t have to untangle all that darkness by yourself. And you don’t have to be ashamed when it hurts.”

Jimmy lowered his gaze again, but this time it wasn’t out of avoidance. It was because the kindness was getting to him. For a moment, he just sat there holding her hands while the fire crackled and the tree lights glowed softly beside them. Then he gave a small, shaky little laugh through his nose and blinked hard.

“That’s annoyingly kind,” he muttered with a faint frown and a half smile.

Sasha smiled.

“I know,” she said.

Jimmy shook his head faintly, still looking down, and when he finally looked back up at the tree, the fear was still there in traces—but it no longer had the whole room to itself. Now there was warmth in it too, warmth, light. And Sasha’s hands wrapped steadily around his like she was reminding him, without saying it again, that he was here now, not there, not with Malcolm, not in the dark.

Scene Song: “This Christmas” ~ Donny Hathaway

For a little while after that, the living room stayed quiet in the softest way. The fire kept burning low and steady in the fireplace. The tree lights glowed warm against the late-day dimness outside, and the snow beyond the windows still drifted down in loose, wandering flakes. Sasha and Jimmy remained on the sofa for a few minutes more, the heaviness of the conversation settling into something gentler now. Not gone. Just softer around the edges. Jimmy sat there with his hands still loosely in Sasha’s, staring ahead at the tree like he was seeing it differently now, not as some glowing threat, not as some trap Malcolm had once poisoned in his mind, just...a tree, a beautiful one, bright, warm, safe. His mouth pulled into the faintest little smile. Then, after a moment, he cleared his throat lightly and looked over at Sasha.

“Will you help me?”

Sasha turned to him.

“Help with what?”

Jimmy looked away at once, like the question itself had put him on the spot. A faint smile touched his mouth, small and hesitant and just shy of embarrassed. He gave one slight nod, then another.

“With decoratin’ my house,” he said.

Sasha blinked.

“With Christmas stuff,” he added.

That made her eyebrows lift in honest surprise, and then a smile spread across her face.

“Really?”

Jimmy glanced back at her with a faint frown and a half smile, as if she needed to stop looking so delighted before it became a whole thing. After a beat, he nodded again.

“Yeah.”

Then, because he could never leave sincerity standing there alone for too long, he added in that signature Sir Lord Jimmy way:

“I mean, apparently the only way to beat trauma is to drag it into the open, dress it in lights, and bully it with festive fuckin’ nonsense until it loses all spiritual authority.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy’s half smile sharpened just a little, pleased he’d landed it.

“So,” he continued with a small shrug, “if I’m gonna exorcise Malcolm’s rancid little views on snow, trees, and decorative joy, I may as well do it properly.”

He pointed one ringed finger at her then.

“But don’t go overboard.”

Sasha laughed harder.

“Overboard?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, narrowing his eyes at her with theatrical suspicion. “I know what you’re like. You’ll start with one tasteful wreath, and next thing I know, my house looks like an elf had a breakdown in a candle shop.”

That got another laugh out of her. Jimmy lightly sucked his teeth and leaned back against the sofa, still wearing that faint smile.

“I’m serious. I want elegance. Seasonal grandeur. Not a fuckin’ glitter crime scene.”

Sasha smiled.

“Okay.”

She got up off the sofa then, already energized by the idea, and Jimmy watched her with the quiet regret of a man who knew he had just set something in motion that he might not fully control.

“Come on,” she said, “then you’re coming with me to Kmart.”

Jimmy let out a sigh at once and rolled his eyes with playful suffering, though the faint smile stayed right where it was.

“Kmart,” he repeated, as if she had just sentenced him to a long and deeply personal inconvenience. “So this is how the festive descent begins.”

Sasha laughed and moved to grab her coat. Jimmy stood up more slowly, adjusting the fall of his shirt and chains with one hand as he muttered:

“We’re about to spend half the damn evening in fluorescent lighting while you pretend to ‘just browse,’ aren’t we?”

Sasha looked over at him with a smile.

“Probably.”

Jimmy shut his eyes briefly and tipped his head back in mock despair.

“Great. I survive Malcolm, the Rage Virus, death, redemption, and the afterlife, only to be taken out by fuckin’ seasonal retail.”

That made Sasha laugh again as she slipped her coat on. Jimmy gave one more dramatic sigh, then headed for the door with her anyway, still muttering under his breath in fake offense.

“If I’m still in that store three hours from now, tell Dad I died bravely.”

Sasha was still smiling as they stepped out into the cold, snow-bright evening and headed off together toward Kmart, one of them openly amused, the other acting put upon in the exact way that meant he was already a little excited. And for the first time that day, the thought of decorating his house didn’t feel like something dark closing in on him. It felt like movement, like maybe, just maybe, the season would not belong to Malcolm this time.

Scene Song: “Christmas in Hollis” ~ Run-D.M.C.

Kmart was loud in that very specific holiday way. Everything about it felt overstimulated. Bright fluorescent lights hummed overhead with all the elegance of a medical waiting room, the seasonal aisles were crammed to near collapse with ornaments, stockings, fake garlands, wrapping paper, ribbon, tree toppers, and enough battery-operated nonsense to make the whole place look like Christmas had exploded and nobody had bothered to clean it up. Somewhere off

in the distance, a tinny instrumental version of “Jingle Bell Rock” was playing through the speakers with just enough cheer to become slightly threatening.

Jimmy walked beside Sasha with one hand in the pocket of his black tracksuit pants and the other occasionally gesturing in disbelief at whatever fresh seasonal offense caught his eye. Sasha, pushing the cart, was already smiling before he even opened his mouth because she knew exactly what was coming. Jimmy stopped in front of a shelf packed with ornaments and stared at them with a deepening, faint frown. The ornaments ranged from elegant glass globes to aggressively cheerful little snowmen, glitter-covered candy canes, awkward angels, sequined stars, tiny reindeer, miniature wrapped presents, and one deeply cursed-looking Santa head with blinking eyes. Jimmy slowly picked up the Santa head ornament between two fingers as if it had personally insulted him.

“What the fuck is this?”

Sasha laughed immediately. Jimmy held it up closer to his face.

“No, seriously, what is this? Why’s he lookin’ at me like he knows where I live?”

Sasha laughed harder.

Jimmy turned the ornament slightly, the blinking eyes catching the light.

“This isn’t festive, this is surveillance,” he said.

He set it back down with visible distrust, then picked up a glittery little angel ornament and squinted at it.

“And this one—why’s this angel look drunk?”

Sasha had one hand over her mouth now. Jimmy held the ornament out toward her.

“Look at her. She’s had three glasses of wine and a spiritual lapse,” he said.

That got a full laugh out of Sasha. Jimmy looked pleased with himself and moved on to the wreath section, where he stood in front of a row of pre-made wreaths in various styles—classic holly, snow-dusted pine, gold ribbon, fake berries, bells, little wooden signs that said things like *JOY* and *MERRY* in curly lettering. He picked up one wreath with a giant red bow and a cluster of glittery fake apples attached.

“Now this one,” he said, “looks like somebody decorated a salad in a state of emotional fuckin’ distress.”

Sasha bent over laughing against the cart handle. Jimmy glanced sideways at her with a half smile.

“You know I’m right,” he said.

He put it back and found another one, this one covered in frosted pinecones and tiny silver bells.

“This is less offensive,” he admitted. “Still slightly haunted, but less offensive.”

Then they reached the shelf of stockings. Jimmy stopped dead in front of them.

There were plush stockings, knitted stockings, velvet stockings, sequined stockings, stockings with faux fur tops, stockings with little snowmen sewn on, stockings with glitter letters, stockings shaped like Santa boots, and one truly hideous one that had a reindeer face on it with a red pom-pom nose. Jimmy stared, then looked at Sasha, then back at the stockings.

“What’s with all the foot-themed fabric worship?”

Sasha barked out a laugh. Jimmy stepped closer and poked the reindeer with one finger.

“And why does this look like it’s beggin’ for help?”

Sasha was laughing so hard that she had to stop the cart completely. Jimmy picked up a sequined gold stocking and held it up against himself.

“This one looks like it belongs to a woman who drinks prosecco and ruins family gatherings.”

Sasha laughed. Jimmy turned and held up a thick red velvet one with white trim.

“This one, however...” He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, “this one has presence. This one says, ‘I may be festive, but I’ll still absolutely fuckin’ fight you in a parking lot.’”

Sasha laughed into her hand, shaking her head.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said with a smile and a shake of her head.

“No,” Jimmy said, draping the stocking back over the shelf, “I’m observant.”

They kept moving through the aisles like that, Jimmy throwing out little profane observations every thirty seconds, Sasha laughing harder than she had all day. By the time they got to the wrapping paper, Jimmy had already declared one Santa figurine “deeply untrustworthy,” a glitter reindeer “visually arrogant,” and a wooden sign that read *BELIEVE* “vague as fuck.” He was still smirking over a set of candy-cane-striped bows when Sasha, checking something on her phone while steering the cart, said casually:

“While we’re here, I need to find out what time to come tomorrow to pick up your gift from customer service.”

Jimmy stopped walking. Sasha kept going for another few steps before noticing the silence beside her. She reached the end of the aisle, looked back, and saw him standing there in the middle of the bright holiday chaos, completely still. His face had changed, not dramatically, just enough. His eyes were on her, wide in that restrained, almost speechless way he got when something had hit him somewhere deeper than he’d expected. Sasha raised a brow.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked.

Jimmy didn’t move right away. Then he asked, voice lower than usual:

“Were you serious?”

Sasha frowned a little, confused.

“About what?”

He looked almost embarrassed to have to say it out loud.

“About...gettin’ me a present.”

The way he said it made the whole aisle seem to quiet around them. Sasha lightly laughed, warm and easy.

“Of course I was serious.”

Jimmy just stared at her. She smiled more fully then.

“I actually got you a whole bunch of gifts,” she added.

That did it. A faint frown came over his face—not upset, not defensive, just deeply touched in a way he didn’t know how to hide quickly enough. He started walking toward her again, slow this time.

“But...” He stopped in front of her. “I didn’t get you anything.”

Sasha laughed softly and shook her head.

“That’s okay.”

Jimmy’s frown deepened.

“No, it’s not. That’s—”

“It is,” she said gently, “because that’s not what Christmas is about anyway.”

Jimmy looked at her closely, listening hard.

“It’s about giving gifts to show the people you love that you love them,” she said. “Not because you expect something back. I bought you gifts because I love you.”

And she said it so simply, so easily, like it was the most natural fact in the world. Then she patted him once on the shoulder and started to move on with the cart. Jimmy stayed where he was for one beat longer, staring after her with that same stunned, touched look still in his eyes. Then he quickly caught up to her, and before she could even fully turn, he reached out and pulled her into a hug. It was sudden enough to surprise her. Sasha laughed softly at once and hugged him back, one arm around his shoulders, the other still half hooked on the cart handle. Jimmy held on tighter than usual for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was low, and there was something in it that made Sasha’s smile soften immediately. It sounded like it might have been cracking a little with emotion.

“I love you.”

Sasha laughed again, but gentler this time.

“I love you too.”

Jimmy pulled back after a moment with a faint frown and half smile, like he was mildly annoyed with himself for getting that sincere in public near a display of novelty ribbon.

“All right,” he muttered, “let’s keep movin’ before I become emotionally festive in aisle nine.”

That made Sasha laugh again as they continued to peruse the decorations together.

Scene Song: “Somewhere In My Memory” ~ John Williams

Later, back at Jimmy’s house, Xmas came to life in pieces. The afternoon stretched onward in a bright, cold wash of snowy light while Sasha and Jimmy moved in and out of the house with bags, boxes, wreaths, garland, ribbon, and lights. The music had shifted now—Run-D.M.C. bringing swagger and bounce into the work—and somehow it fit Jimmy perfectly. The beat moved through the house while they decorated, making the whole thing feel less delicate and sentimental and more alive. Inside, they worked room by room.

Sasha stood on a small ladder in the living room, looping garland along the mantel while Jimmy, below her, held up two strands of lights and asked, with complete seriousness, which one looked “more expensive spiritually.” She laughed and told him that was not a real category. He said it absolutely was and that one strand looked like “suburban dentist Xmas” while the other had “actual class.” A little while later, he was hanging stockings with exaggerated concentration, stepping back every few seconds as if he were curating a museum exhibit.

“No,” he said at one point, lifting one slightly higher. “This one’s got star quality. It can’t be hidden in the visual mix like some background peasant.”

Sasha laughed from the tree, where she was fluffing branches and trying to get the lights to sit evenly. They decorated the tree together, passing ornaments back and forth. Jimmy insisted on spacing them with the precision of a man arranging jewels for a royal funeral. He rejected one glitter snowman outright for “having clown energy” and made Sasha laugh so hard she nearly dropped a gold ornament. When she tried to put a bright, handmade-looking ornament near the front, Jimmy stared at it, then at her.

“Sasha.”

“What?”

“That looks like a festive accident.”

“It’s cute.”

“It looks unstable.”

Still, after complaining, he hung it carefully anyway. The fire burned low in the living room while the tree slowly transformed under their hands into something warm, glowing, and beautiful. Lights shimmered. Red and gold ornaments caught the firelight, and the room changed by degrees, each little addition softening it further. Elsewhere inside the house, wreaths went up on doors and windows. Candles appeared on side tables. Garlands wound over shelves and archways. Soft lights came on in corners that had felt bare before. Jimmy kept talking the whole time, offering dramatic opinions on every item they unpacked. At one point, holding up a decorative bow, he said:

“This is acceptable. Slightly smug, but acceptable.”

And later, while untangling a strand of lights with visible irritation:

“If this thing knots itself one more time, I’m namin’ it Malcolm and throwin’ it in the fuckin’ sea.”

That made Sasha laugh so hard she had to sit down for a second on the sofa arm. Outside, the work continued in the cold. Snow still lay across the beach and the front path in soft white drifts while the house slowly took on its own holiday glow. Sasha wrapped garland around the porch railings while Jimmy hung lights along the trim with theatrical suffering and a running commentary about how no one had ever properly appreciated “the physical labor of seasonal elegance.” A wreath went on the front door, then two lit trees in decorative planters by the porch, then warm white lights along the windows and roofline. At one point, Sasha stepped back to check the spacing, and Jimmy, up on the porch ladder, called down:

“If I fall because of decorative ambition, make sure they bury me in this tracksuit. I want the afterlife to know I died stylish.”

Sasha laughed.

“You’re so dramatic, I swear,” Sasha said with a half smile.

“I’m always dramatic,” he called back with a smile of his own, “that’s why this works.”

They went in and out of the front yard, talking, laughing, carrying boxes, brushing snow from their sleeves, their breath visible in the cold. The house changed with each pass—first a little brighter, then warmer, then somehow fuller, as if the decorations were not just making it festive but making it feel inhabited in a new way, and through it all, Jimmy’s mood lifted, not all at once, not in one neat transformation, but gradually, as the hours went on and the rooms filled with light and color and warmth, something in him gave way. The old recoil softened. The old suspicion lost ground. There was too much laughter in the air, too much shared effort, too much care built into every strand of lights and every ornament placed by hand. By the time the last of the outside lights were glowing against the snow and the inside tree stood bright in the living room window, the whole house looked changed. So did Jimmy.

Scene Song: “Hungry Heart” ~ Bruce Springsteen

The snow crunched softly underfoot as Jimmy and Sasha stood just outside his house, the lights glowing warm against the white ground, the ocean stretching dark and endless beyond. Jimmy still had his eyes on the house, like he couldn't quite stop looking at it.

"...Right," Jimmy muttered, almost to himself. "I'm not sayin' it's perfect—but it's dangerously close."

Sasha laughed softly beside him. Before she could respond—footsteps, voices, laughter. Jimmy turned his head sharply toward the path leading up to the house, and there they were. Remmick. Samson. Ian. Kellie. Cathy. Tom. Jane Ji. Spike. All walking up together like this had been planned for hours. Jimmy stared, then squinted slightly.

"...What are all of you doin' at my house?"

The way he said it wasn't hostile. It was just a little suspicious.

"This some kind of festive ambush, or have I accidentally become socially popular overnight?" Jimmy added.

Ian laughed. Sasha stepped forward a little, smiling.

"They're here because it's time," Sasha said.

Jimmy looked at her.

"...Time for what?" Jimmy asked.

She smiled.

"My annual snowball fight tournament," she responded.

Jimmy slowly turned his head toward her. That look hit his face—the faint frown, one brow raised, that half-smile of disbelief.

"Annual...snowball fights?" Jimmy repeated. "What the hell is that?"

Remmick smiled easily.

"It's a snowball tournament," Remmick responded. "We toss snowballs at each other."

Cathy added with a light smile:

"Yeah, and whoever gets hit fifteen times is out. We keep goin' until there's only one person left. That last one's the winner."

Jimmy looked between them, then looked away, a quiet little laugh slipped out of him as he shook his head.

“...Why do I feel like this whole game shite was invented about five minutes ago?” Jimmy said with a faint smile.

Ian laughed.

“Well,” Ian said, stepping forward slightly, “you did tell Cathy you weren’t allowed to play in the snow growin’ up.”

Jimmy was still for just a fraction. Ian smiled.

“So I think tonight...that changes,” Ian added.

Jimmy looked away again, another quiet laugh under his breath—this one softer. Then Sasha clapped her hands together once, loud and bright.

“Okay!” Sasha called out. “Game’s about to begin!”

Everyone started shifting, spreading out, and taking positions as if it were a real match. Sasha pointed around.

“Remember—fifteen hits, and you’re out!” Sasha yelled. “Last one standing wins!”

Jimmy watched them, amused, slightly incredulous—then Sasha raised her hand dramatically.

“On your mark...”

Everyone leaned in slightly.

“Get set—”

And then—with a smile, in a near-perfect imitation of Jimmy’s own Scottish-accented delivery, Sasha said:

“Fucking go!”

Jimmy’s head snapped toward her with his eyes wide.

“...Oi—!”

A shocked laugh burst out of him immediately.

“You cheeky—!”

But he didn’t even finish the sentence, because the first snowball flew. Chaos was instant. Snowballs cut through the air from every direction as everyone broke into motion at once—running, ducking, laughing, shouting. The quiet snow-covered street turned into a blur of movement and noise. Jimmy moved fast—faster than anyone probably expected—ducking one throw, sidestepping another, grabbing a handful of snow and packing it quickly.

“Right—right—this is how we’re doin’ it, aye?” Jimmy exclaimed, smiling.

Jimmy launched one, and it hit Ian square in the shoulder. Ian laughed.

“Oh, it’s on now!”

More snow flew. Remmick dodged sideways, scooped snow, fired—Jane Ji barely ducked in time. Kellie shrieked with laughter as she ran behind Samson, using him as a shield before popping out to throw one at Spike—*THWACK*. Spike took it right to the chest.

“Aw, come on—!” Spike exclaimed with a smile before laughing.

“*Out!*” Kellie shouted immediately, jumping up and down. “That’s fifteen!”

“*Already?!*” Spike laughed, hands up. “Man—!”

Jimmy and Ian burst out laughing.

“Down he goes!” Jimmy called before laughing again. “First casualty—tragic but predictable!”

The game surged on. Tom got hit next, with Cathy landing the final shot with a clean throw that made her clap and cheer.

“*Yes!*” Cathy exclaimed before laughing.

Jimmy pointed at her.

“That was a professional *finish*—that had intent, Cathy!”

Jane Ji went down after that—Remmick taking her out with steady, efficient throws.

“Damn,” Jane Ji laughed, stepping aside. “Y’all are ruthless.”

“Only slightly,” Remmick said with a smile before sharing a laugh with Jimmy.

Then—Samson. Jimmy caught him with the last hit—*THUMP*. Samson laughed, stepping back.

“Aight, I’m out,” Samson said with a smile.

Jimmy froze for half a second—then exploded.

“HOWZAT!” Jimmy exclaimed with a smile before laughing.

Jimmy clapped loudly, bouncing on his feet, a full smile on his face—completely unguarded, completely ridiculous. He pointed at Samson as if he’d just won a championship.

“That’s clean work!” Jimmy exclaimed. “Precision! Style! Authority!”

Jimmy did a little celebratory bounce-step, clapping again like a kid who’d just scored a winning goal. Everyone burst out laughing.

“I can’t—look at him!” Cathy exclaimed before laughing again.

Jimmy didn’t care though; he was having *too* much fun. Then—*THWACK*. Cathy got hit by Sasha’s throw. Cathy gasped, then laughed immediately as she stepped out.

“Okay! Okay!” Cathy said with a smile.

Jimmy jogged over, high-fiving Sasha.

“That’s how you do it, sis!”

Sasha laughed—and before she could even fully recover—*POOF*. Snow exploded gently over the top of her head. Sasha froze. Jimmy stood there, already laughing.

“Oh—!” Jimmy exclaimed before laughing again.

She shoved him lightly.

“Jimmy!” she exclaimed before laughing.

He laughed harder, stepping back.

“That’s one!” Jimmy said, pointing at her. “Fourteen more and you’re done!”

Sasha laughed again despite herself. Kellie went down next—Remmick landing the final hit. Jimmy laughed loud and bright.

“Down she goes!” Jimmy exclaimed, smiling.

Kellie laughed, hands up.

“Y’all are too much!” Kellie exclaimed.

Now it was down to three: Remmick, Sasha, Jimmy. Snow flew faster now. Jimmy moved with surprising agility, ducking low, grabbing snow, pivoting—*THWACK*. Remmick took the final hit, and he nodded once, stepping back with a small smile.

“All right, all right, well played,” Remmick said with a smile.

Jimmy pointed at him.

“Respectfully defeated,” Jimmy said, smiling.

Now, it was down to just two: Jimmy and Sasha. They circled each other slightly, both smiling, both already laughing.

“Don’t go easy on me,” Sasha warned, smiling.

Jimmy half-smiled.

“I never do.”

They moved at the same time, then snowballs flew—one missed, another grazed. Then—Jimmy faked left—Sasha shifted—and—*THUMP*. *It was a* direct hit. Sasha froze, then laughed, hands going up.

“Okay! Okay—I’m out!” Sasha exclaimed.

And that was it. Jimmy stood there for half a second, then he absolutely lost it.

“YES!” Jimmy exclaimed.

He jumped, clapped, spun slightly—full giddy, boyish celebration.

“I win! I fuckin’ win!” he exclaimed.

He laughed, pointing at everyone like he couldn’t believe it.

“Did you all see that? That was dominance!” Jimmy exclaimed.

And then—without warning—everyone hit him at once, snowballs from every direction. *POOF*—*POOF*—*POOF*. Jimmy staggered back, laughing instantly.

“Oh!” Jimmy shouted

More snow hit him before he threw his arms up, still laughing.

“You’re all just sore losers!” Jimmy exclaimed.

That only made them laugh harder. Ian shook his head.

“That’s exactly what a winner would say,” Ian said, smiling.

“He’s insufferable,” Cathy said before laughing.

“But he earned it, though, props, Jimmy,” Samson said with a smile and a nod.

Jimmy stood there in the middle of it all, snow on his clothes, in his hair, still smiling—still laughing, not guarded, not holding back, just—*happy*.

Scene Song: “Christmas Star” ~ John Williams

Later that evening, the house had settled into that rare kind of winter warmth that made everything feel gentler. Inside Sasha’s kitchen, the lights were low and golden, the counters warm from the glow of the overhead fixtures and the nearby living room tree. The scent of pine and firewood now seemed to live permanently in the house. In the living room, Remmick and Kellie were on the sofa watching *Home Alone*, their attention split between the movie and each other’s occasional comments, the sound of the film carrying softly into the kitchen. Sasha stood at the counter, fixing cups of hot coffee, moving easily, automatically. Then she glanced out the kitchen window and smiled. Jimmy was outside. He was near the front of the house where the snow had piled thick and clean, bent slightly over what was very clearly a snowman in progress. Even from inside, Sasha could tell he was taking it seriously.

That alone made her laugh softly. She set the mugs down, reached for her coat from the back of the kitchen chair, slipped it on, and headed outside. The cold greeted her immediately, crisp but not cruel, the snow beneath her boots making that soft little crunching sound as she crossed toward him. Jimmy looked up as she approached, and Sasha immediately burst out laughing. The snowman—the snowman had a tiara, and gold chains, not real ones, of course, but decorative ones that Jimmy had clearly decided were necessary for artistic integrity. Its little snow face was simple and slightly crooked. Its rounded body was decent enough. But the tiara perched on its head and the chains around its neck gave it the unmistakable air of being the most overdressed snowman in the afterlife. Sasha laughed as she came up beside him.

“Jimmy, why the hell would you dress your snowman like that?”

Jimmy looked at the snowman, then at her, and let out a laugh of his own.

“Because,” he said, “*that* is *Mini* Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal.”

Then he boyishly laughed again—bright, silly, pleased with himself in the exact way of a child who’d made a joke he considered genius. Sasha shook her head, still laughing.

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again, you’re ridiculous.”

“I’m a visionary,” Jimmy corrected with a faint frown and a half smile.

Sasha looked at the snowman over again and smiled.

“It actually looks nice.”

Jimmy’s expression shifted into one of immediate pride. He looked back at his creation with a slight nod.

“Aye,” he said. “Mini Jimmy’s got presence, flavor. He’s got a proper sense of himself.”

That made Sasha laugh again. Jimmy lightly gestured toward the snowman.

“You can’t just roll up some snow and expect greatness. It needs style. Distinction. A point of view,” he said.

Sasha laughed under her breath and stood there beside him while snow fell softly around them, the decorated house glowing warm behind them. For a moment, Jimmy just looked at the snowman, then at the house, the lights, the wreath, the softly lit windows, and slowly, without warning, the playfulness in his face faded. A frown appeared, not dramatic, not sharp, just quiet and slow and serious enough that Sasha noticed it immediately. She looked at him. Jimmy kept staring ahead. Then he asked, voice low:

“Why does it feel like I don’t deserve any of this?”

Sasha frowned, caught off guard.

“What?”

Jimmy didn't answer right away. He just stood there looking at the house, then at the snowman again, then back toward the glowing windows like he was trying to understand something that hurt. Finally, he spoke again.

"The lights. The decorations. The snowman. Even that snowball fight earlier..." He swallowed lightly. "It all felt..."

He frowned deeper, searching.

"...warm."

That one word landed heavily in the cold. Jimmy's eyes stayed fixed ahead.

"Warmth. Acceptance. Love," he let out a quiet breath through his nose, "*real* warmth too. Not fake shite, not performance, not fear dressed up as order. Just..."

He shook his head faintly.

"It felt *real*."

Sasha said nothing, letting him continue.

"And I've never had that before," he said, "not really, not like this, not where it wasn't attached to some threat, some cruelty, some bargain."

He looked down briefly, then back up at the house.

"And with everythin' I did on Earth...all the horror, all the blood, all the people I hurt while I was with the Jimmies..."

His voice lowered even more.

"I keep wonderin' if I actually deserve to be surrounded by any of this. Do I deserve the warmth? The acceptance? The love?"

He gave the smallest shake of his head.

"Or am I just standin' in the middle of somethin' that should belong to better people?"

Sasha's face softened at once. She reached for both his hands and turned him gently toward her. Jimmy let her. He looked at her with that same serious frown, all the bravado gone out of him for the moment, every bit of him open and uncertain in the snowlight.

"Of course you deserve it," she said.

Jimmy's eyes stayed on hers.

"Jimmy," Sasha said gently, "I'm not going to bullshit you here. When you were on Earth, yeah—you were a very bad person. You did terrible things, horrible things, but all of it came from childhood trauma that devoured you from the inside out. It twisted everything in you until there was barely room left for the real you to breathe."

He listened without moving.

“But then you came here,” she said, “to the afterlife of Pelmont. And what you turned into... honestly, it’s something most people would’ve said was impossible.”

Jimmy’s eyes flickered slightly.

“You turned into a beautiful soul,” she continued, “one with this pure innocence inside you that—when it comes out, makes people love you *so* incredibly much. You don’t even realize how bright it is sometimes, but it’s there, and everyone here sees it.”

Jimmy’s mouth tightened. Sasha squeezed his hands gently.

“*Everyone* here is proud of the person you changed into,” she said, “especially me.”

That made his eyes start to shine.

“Every day,” she went on, her voice soft and sure, “you make me proud of you. *Every* single day, you make me proud to call myself your sister, proud to call you my brother.”

Now his eyes were glassy.

“So yeah,” Sasha said, holding his gaze, “you deserve this, Jimmy, *all* of this. The warmth, the love, the acceptance, the lights, the laughter, the snow, the joy—you deserve it because you *earned* it. You *fought* your way into becoming this person. You didn’t just wake up redeemed. You *chose* it, and you *continue* to choose it every day, again and again. So yeah, you deserve it, *all* of it.”

That did it. Jimmy looked away, with a serious frown still there, but now his eyes had fully clouded with tears. For a second, he tried to hold himself together, then he stepped forward and pulled her into a hug, a real one, tight. Protective and grateful and shaken all at once. When he spoke, his voice was slightly cracking.

“I know I’ve said this before,” he said, “but I’ll say it again—thank you for not giving up on me, Sasha, not on Earth and not here in Pelmont. Thank you for not thinkin’ I was unfixable, unredeemable. Thank you for seein’ me, the *real* me.”

His hold on her tightened just a little.

“I love you,” he added.

Sasha hugged him back tightly, her own eyes shimmering now, and softly, close to his shoulder, she said:

“Thank you for giving me what I always wanted and never had.”

Jimmy pulled back just enough to look at her. He quickly wiped at the tears streaming down his face, then frowned at her with one brow raised.

“What was it that I gave you?”

Sasha smiled through the wet shine in her eyes.

“A younger brother to love.”

Jimmy stared at her for half a second, then smiled, not big, not flashy, just *real*.

He kissed the top of her head, then wrapped one arm warmly around her shoulders.

“Come on,” he said, his voice steadier now. “Let’s get inside before you catch that twenty-four-hour flu bug from standin’ out here in this cold.”

Sasha laughed softly. Jimmy glanced down at her with a faint frown and half smile.

“Because then I’ll have to take care of you,” he said, “and while I’d obviously do it with style and unmatched devotion, I’d also complain the whole fuckin’ time.”

That got a fuller laugh out of her.

“I know you would,” she said, smiling.

“Aye,” Jimmy said as they started walking back toward the house together. “I’d be magnificent about it. But deeply fuckin’ put upon.”

Sasha laughed again as they went inside, his arm still around her, the warmth of the house opening around them as the door shut behind them, and outside, the snow kept falling softly around Mini Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, tiara and chains intact, standing guard in the glowing winter night.

Chapter 3: Chapter Two

Scene Song: “Somewhere In My Memory” ~ John Williams

Christmas morning in Pelmont came in soft and silver-blue. The snow outside still blanketed the beach and the paths between the houses, untouched in places, sparkling faintly under the pale early light. Inside Sasha’s house, everything was quiet in that deep, early-morning holiday way. The tree stood glowing in the living room, its lights warm against the dim hush of dawn, the fireplace low but still alive with a bed of orange-gold heat. Stockings hung along the mantle. The room smelled faintly of pine, cinnamon, and yesterday’s fire.

Upstairs, Jimmy woke slowly. He sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes, platinum hair tousled in a way that would’ve horrified him if he’d fully registered it. For a few drowsy seconds, he just sat there under the blankets, staring ahead in that foggy, waking state where thought arrived late. Then he stretched lightly, exhaled, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. To Jimmy, it was a regular morning. Maybe not fully regular, because the house wasn’t his and more people were sleeping under one roof than usual, but still—regular enough. In his mind, the next logical step in the day was obvious:

Go downstairs.

Get cereal.

Watch Teletubbies.

That was the proper order of civilization. Still half sleepy, he made his way out of the guest room, down the stairs, and into the living room—and stopped. Under the tree were presents, a *lot* of presents. Wrapped in bright paper and bows, stacked in warm little clusters beneath the glowing branches, and a shocking number of them—far too many—had his name on them. Jimmy froze. His eyes widened. Then a smile spread over his face so fast and so boyishly that for a second he looked exactly like what he was underneath everything else: a child who had just stumbled into joy before he’d had time to prepare for it. He took a slow step forward, then another. His smile stayed there—but then flickered. His brow faintly furrowed. A thinking look came into his face. Slowly, he turned as if to go back upstairs, as if maybe this was too much. Like maybe he needed another second before whatever this was fully landed on him, but then he stopped. He looked back at the presents. His eyes moved over them again, and this time the smile that came over him was softer. *Adorable*. Almost private. Then, with a sudden decision, he strode over, dropped down by the tree, grabbed one of the gifts with his name on it, and started tearing the paper off with impatient excitement. Inside—Purple, soft, round. He pulled it free and stared. It was a talking Tinky Winky doll.



For one second, Jimmy just looked at it in total disbelief, then he gasped, then yelled:

“OH, FUCK OFF!”

And then the laughter hit him—loud, delighted, disbelieving laughter that tore through the quiet house like somebody had set off fireworks in the living room. He held the doll up in both hands.

“It talks?!”

The sudden shout and laughter sent chaos upstairs. Footsteps thundered. Doors opened, and within seconds, Sasha came rushing downstairs first, half-alarmed, half awake.

“Jimmy! What’s wrong?”

Right behind her came Remmick, Ian, Kellie, and Spike, all in various stages of hurried concern. Remmick’s voice hit before he fully reached the bottom.

“Yeah, is somebody hurt?”

Jimmy turned toward them, jumped to his feet with the doll in one hand, and looked so incandescently happy that it wiped the concern off all their faces instantly. He rushed over to Sasha, bouncing once on the balls of his feet like he physically couldn’t contain the excitement.

“You got me a fuckin’ Teletummy doll that talks?!” Jimmy exclaimed. “This is absolutely *glorious!*”

Sasha’s panic died into a laugh at once.

“Yeah,” she said, a faint frown on her face from laughing and waking up too fast at the same time. “I knew you’d like it.”

“*Like it?!*” Jimmy repeated, scandalized by the understatement. “Sasha, this is absolute *art!*”

Then he pulled her into a hug so hard it nearly folded her in half.

“Jimmy!” she laughed.

He squeezed anyway. When he let her go, he immediately looked back at the doll with the same bright smile, pressing it again just to hear it speak. That was when Isla finally came downstairs too, slower than the others, taking in the scene with amused confusion.

“What’s all the commotion?”

Spike, already smiling now that he realized no one was dying, pointed toward Jimmy.

“He’s opening his gifts.”

Isla nodded once and laughed under her breath. Spike immediately turned to her.

“Can I open mine now?”

She smiled.

“Oh sure, honey, yeah, go ahead.”

“*YES!*” Spike exclaimed with a smile.

Spike bolted for the tree and dropped to the floor near it at once, already reaching for his pile. Jimmy had also turned right back around and returned to his own gifts with no intention of slowing down. Now the room woke fully. Paper started to tear, the boxes slid, and the bows were flung aside. The whole living room was filled with the sound of Christmas happening. Jimmy sat cross-legged by the tree in full, feral gift-opening focus, the Tinky Winky doll beside him like a prized relic. He grabbed the next one and tore it open. Inside was a **Game Boy Advance**. He stared, then looked up at Sasha, then back down at it.

“Are you serious?” he asked with slightly widened eyes and a half smile.

He turned it over in his hands as if it might vanish.

“This is real? This is a real fuckin’ Game Boy Advance?”

Sasha, laughing, nodded. Jimmy’s face lit again.

“Shite—this is *beautiful!*”

He immediately lunged for the next one and ripped it open. Inside was the **Teletubbies video game** for the Game Boy Advance. Jimmy let out a sound somewhere between a gasp and a laugh.

“No! No, you evil genius!”

He held up the game.

“You got the proper companion piece! This is strategic gift architecture!”

Kellie laughed from the sofa arm.

“Strategic gift architecture?” Kellie said.

“Aye,” Jimmy said, still smiling. “This wasn’t random. This is curated happiness.”

The next gift was a box. Jimmy tore it open—and inside? **Adidas Adimatic atmos Glory Purple shoes.**



Jimmy’s eyes widened at once. He grabbed one shoe and held it up as if it had descended from heaven itself.

“Oh, okay, now you’re all just showin’ off.”

Sasha, Remmick, and Kellie laughed.

“These match my dark purple tracksuit!” Jimmy said before laughing. “Sasha—look at this shite! This is coordinated fuckin’ majesty!”

Ian laughed.

“They do suit you,” Ian said, smiling.

“They don’t just suit me,” Jimmy corrected, scandalized with a faint frown and a half smile, “they *complete* me.”

That got a bigger laugh out of everyone. Next, he tore open another box and found a **purple plush blanket**, thick and soft, and immediately rubbed it between both hands.

“Oh, this is decadent,” Jimmy said, smiling.

Across from him, Spike suddenly gasped so hard that everyone looked over. He had just opened the gift from Isla. Inside was an expensive looking **drone**. Spike stared at it as if it had personally answered a prayer.



“Oh wow!” Spike said breathlessly with a smile. “I’ve wanted this for the longest! Thanks, mom!”

He sprang up, ran to Isla, and hugged her tight. She laughed and wrapped her arms around him.

“Oh, you’re welcome, honey! I’m so glad you like it!”

Then she kissed the top of his head while Spike still smiled as if he might levitate. Back near the tree, Jimmy had already moved on. The next gift came from Ian. Jimmy opened it, frowned in concentration at the box's shape, and then pulled out a **portable DVD player**.



Jimmy looked at Ian with a brow raised and a smile.

“Dad.”

Then, from the same gift pile, Jimmy pulled out the **interactive Raven DVD game**.



Jimmy stared at it, and then his face broke completely.

“You didn’t,” Jimmy said, smiling.

“I did,” Ian said with a smile.

Jimmy held up the DVD game as if he’d just found treasure.

“Raven? Interactive Raven?”

Jimmy looked between the DVD player and the game.

“This is outrageous. This is fuckin’ outrageous.”

Ian laughed.

“You said you liked the show.”

“*Liked* it?” Jimmy said with raised brows while smiling. “I’m spiritually invested in it!”

Ian laughed.

“This is brilliant, thank you, Dad,” Jimmy said before leaning over and hugging Ian.

Another gift from Kellie turned out to be a **custom black mug with a gold crown and the words SIR LORD OF MORNING TELLY** on it. Jimmy laughed hard.

“All right, this house is becomin’ too fuckin’ supportive of my brand,” Jimmy said, smiling. Then Remmick tapped Jimmy on the shoulder. Jimmy turned. Remmick motioned with his chin toward the long table in the corner by the window.

“Look over there,” Remmick said.

Jimmy frowned faintly and followed the gesture. On the long table sat the train set. It was elaborate, wide, and multi-layered. Tracks looping and curving over bridges and around little raised sections. The train itself was already in place, black and red with fine detailing, and beside it sat the mechanism for the steam.



For a second, Jimmy just stared, then he looked at Remmick.

“Is that for me?”

Remmick nodded with a faint smile.

“Yeah. Thought you might like—”

But Jimmy wasn’t listening anymore. He was already on his feet and moving toward it with a quick, focused pace, all other gifts forgotten in the immediate gravitational pull of the train set. He reached the table, stared down at it, then pressed the button on the side of the front engine. Steam puffed out. The train gave a realistic whistle. Then it began to move—chugging along the track with that satisfying, mechanical rhythm of something beautifully made. Jimmy’s eyes widened, and then the smile came—bright, awestruck, *childlike*.

“Shite,” Jimmy said under his breath, “this is fuckin’ incredible!”

A soft, giddy little laugh escaped him, shoulders lifting slightly with it. Ian came over and smiled at the sight.

“Oh yeah,” Ian said, “that *is* really spectacular.”

Remmick stepped closer too, about to say something else, but Jimmy had already stooped down until his chin rested on top of his folded hands at the edge of the table. He watched the train go around the track with full, undivided attention. The steam puffed. The engine rolled. Jimmy gave another small laugh under his breath, the kind that only happened when he was genuinely enchanted. Remmick looked at Sasha. Sasha came over beside him, watched Jimmy for two seconds, then laughed.

“Great,” she said. “Now he’ll be preoccupied for hours watching that thing.”

Remmick laughed. Ian did too. And for a while, that was Christmas morning:

Spike on the floor, examining his drone. Isla, smiling from the sofa. Kellie, curled up, warm and amused. Ian and Remmick, standing near the train table, Sasha, watching all of it with that quiet, deeply satisfied look she got when the people she loved were happy and didn’t know she was looking. The tree lights glowed, the fireplace crackled, and wrapping paper lay scattered across the floor like bright little casualties of joy. And Jimmy—Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, once feared, once broken, once starved of every ordinary softness a boy should’ve had—knelt at a table by the window, chin in his hands, watching a toy train circle its tracks with the full wonder of somebody finally, finally being allowed to keep Christmas.

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Scene Song: “No More” (Instrumental) ~ 3LW

Jackie’s house was alive with Christmas. Warm light poured from every window, golden against the cold dark outside, while inside the house, the sound of people talking, laughing, and moving around carried out in soft bursts every time the door opened. The air smelled like food, pine, candles, and the kind of holiday fullness that only came from a house crammed with

family, friends, and too much life to fit neatly inside four walls. Jimmy stepped out onto the front porch for a little air.

He shut the door behind him and paused, the cold kissing his face at once. Snow still lay over everything in thick white softness, and the lights strung along the porch and roofline cast a warm glow across the yard and the driveway. He glanced to the far side of the porch and saw Kellie standing there by the railing, looking out at the night. Jimmy walked over to her, hands in the pockets of his dark purple tracksuit pants, chains catching a bit of the porch light.

“There you are,” he said. “I was wonderin’ what the hell happened to you. Thought maybe you’d been swallowed whole by all the festive fuckin’ affection in there.”

Kellie laughed and glanced over at him.

“After a while, all that lovey-dovey shit starts to give you a fucking cavity,” she said.

That made Jimmy laugh. He leaned beside her against the railing for a second, then looked at her.

“You didn’t ask me where your present is,” he said.

Kellie turned her head slowly, already half-smiling in disbelief.

“You got me a present?”

Jimmy looked away briefly with a smile, like he found the question mildly insulting.

“Of course.”

Then he added, with a faint frown and a little shrug:

“I got Sasha one too, but hers comes right before dinner because it’s that fuckin’ glorious.”

Kellie lightly laughed, still staring at him.

“I’m actually surprised you got me a gift.”

Jimmy laughed under his breath and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a long, dark purple velvet box, and the second Kellie saw its shape, her eyes widened. Jimmy immediately held up one ringed finger.

“Now hold the fuck on,” he said, “because it is not what you think it is.”

Kellie burst out laughing. Jimmy gave her a look.

“I’d rather go back to childhood and get beaten by Malcolm all over again than be tied down.”

That made her laugh harder, and then she snatched the box from him. Jimmy watched her with a half smile as she opened it. Inside was a golden key on a beautiful, expensive-looking chain. Kellie’s brow rose at once.

“A key?” she said. “Jimmy, what is this?”

Jimmy’s smile softened.

“It’s the key to my house.”

Kellie looked up at him. Jimmy glanced away briefly, then back at her.

“Sasha once told me,” he said, quieter now, “that if you give someone the key to your house, it means you trust them. And it means you love them.”

Kellie just stared at him then, her face changing. There was a faint frown there now too, one made entirely of being moved by something she hadn’t expected. She looked at the key, then at him.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Jimmy gave a short, almost shy laugh and looked away briefly toward the snowy yard.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, like he didn’t especially want the entire house hearing him. Then he looked back at her and just said it plainly. “I love you, Kellie.”

That did it. Kellie’s whole face softened.

“Jimmy...”

She stepped forward and pulled him close, then kissed him warmly. When she pulled back, she was smiling with that touched, feminine softness that came when a woman had just been given something more meaningful than she was prepared for.

“I love you too.”

She slipped the chain on, letting the key settle against her chest, and looked down at it with a smile before glancing back up at him.

“And don’t you dare fucking think you’re getting this key back.”

Jimmy laughed.

“Oh, trust me, if I wanted you out of my house, I’d have to *physically* remove you, and frankly, that sounds fuckin’ exhausting.”

Kellie laughed and lightly smacked his arm.

A little while later, just before everyone gathered around the dining room table, Jimmy decided it was time. The whole house was in motion then—people carrying dishes, Jackie calling for this or that to be set down, somebody laughing too loudly in the living room, the rich smell of

collard greens and candied yams and ham and baked macaroni filling every inch of the place. Jimmy looked around and then said loudly:

“Right, before anybody sits down, there’s one thing I’ve got to do first.”

The room quieted in curious pieces. People turned. Sasha looked at him with immediate suspicion. Jimmy took hold of her hand and said:

“I’ve got a gift for you.”

Sasha blinked.

“A gift?” she asked. “For me?”

Jimmy nodded once, then looked around at everyone else.

“All of you—come outside.”

Now the confusion was everywhere, still, they followed. Outside, the cold air hit them all at once as they stepped onto the porch and out into the snow-bright yard. There, in front of the house, was a car completely covered by a white cover. Jimmy smiled and turned toward Sasha.

“Cover your eyes.”

She laughed.

“This is probably a gigantic Teletubby Poe doll, isn’t it?”

A few of the others laughed at that. Jimmy just pointed.

“Eyes covered,” he said with a faint smile.

People obeyed with varying degrees of seriousness. Sasha covered her eyes properly, smiling the whole time. Jimmy strode toward the covered vehicle, grabbed the cover, and yanked it off in one dramatic pull. Underneath it—a **1976 red Gran Torino**, polished and beautiful, exactly like the one from *Starsky and Hutch*. Jimmy stepped back, smiling.

“Okay, open ’em,” Jimmy said.

Everyone looked. A ripple went through the group at once—soft gasps, low impressed sounds, little murmured “awws’s and compliments passed between people. Sasha saw it—and screamed, not a frightened scream, a full, ecstatic, childlike scream. Remmick leaned slightly toward Jackie with a faint frown and smile and asked under his breath:

“That yell means she likes it?”

Jackie laughed.

“Oh, that *definitely* means she likes it. That’s been her dream car since she was a little girl.”

Jimmy laughed as Sasha just stood there staring, then he walked back over to her.

“Well?” he asked. “D’you like it?”

Sasha looked at him, then at the car, then back at him again. Her eyes filled so quickly with tears that it made Jimmy’s smile falter into confusion, and then she started lightly sobbing. Jimmy frowned at once.

“You don’t like it?” Jimmy asked.

Before he could say anything else, Sasha threw her arms around him and hugged him hard. That pulled a soft chorus of “aww” from a few people behind them. Jimmy laughed in relief and hugged her back warmly.

“All right,” he said. “I’m gonna take that as a yes.”

After a few seconds, Sasha pulled back just enough to look at him, tears still spilling freely.

“Ever since I was a little girl,” she said tearfully, “I watched *Starsky and Hutch* and dreamed of having this car. I never thought I actually would. And now here you are giving me the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

Jimmy just looked at her, smiling softly. She sniffled and asked:

“What made you decide to give me a gift—especially one of this stature?”

Jimmy’s expression softened even more.

“Because I know what that car means to you,” he said, “and I wanted to give you something that’d make your eyes sparkle with joy and excitement the way mine sparkle every time I see you.”

That made her cry harder in the sweetest way. She hugged him again at once.

“This is the best gift I’ve ever received,” she said tearfully. “Thank you.”

Jimmy smiled and shook his head slightly.

“There’s no thanks needed.”

Then, warm and simple, he said:

“I love you, Sasha.”

She pulled back just enough to say it back.

“I love you too.”

And once they let go, Jimmy looked toward the house, and abruptly said:

“Right, now can we all get the fuck back inside because I heard collard greens and candied yams are on that table and I’m ready to absolutely annihilate them.”

That got laughter from everyone.

“Annihilate them?” John repeated, laughing.

“Aye,” Jimmy said, smiling and already turning toward the door. “I’m about to commit elegant fuckin’ seasonal destruction.”

And laughing, they all went back inside.

Scene Song: “We Are Family” ~ Sister Sledge

The dining room at Jackie’s house looked like something out of a holiday dream. The long table stretched nearly the full length of the room, covered in dishes and candlelight and food enough to feed an army. Honey-glazed ham shone under the lights. Fried chicken and baked chicken sat in platters beside baked macaroni and cheese, collard greens, candied yams, yellow rice, cornbread, banana pudding, coconut cake, BBQ ribs, fried okra, and potato salad. Five large bottles of wine stood spaced along the table, and near Spike’s seat sat a proud glass pitcher of Kool-Aid that felt no less important than the wine. Around the table sat everyone. Kellie, Jimmy, Sasha, Remmick, Jackie, and John. Skylar, Ian, Deborah, Spike, Isla. Sasha’s grandparents, aunts, and uncles, Samson, Tom, and Cathy, Jane Ji, Matthew, and George.

Voices filled the room. Laughter passed from one end of the table to the other. Somebody was telling a story near the middle while somebody else interrupted it. Glasses clinked. Plates were passed. It was loud and full and happy and alive in the exact way holiday dinners were meant to be. Then Jimmy lifted his wine glass and clanged it lightly. Once, twice, and gradually the room settled. Jimmy rose to his feet. Sasha saw him standing there with the glass in his hand and immediately laughed under her breath.

“Here we go,” Sasha said with a faint smile.

Remmick heard it and laughed. Jackie, overhearing both of them, laughed too. Jimmy cast them all a faint frown and half smile before clearing his throat.

“Right,” he said. “I’d like to say somethin’.”

And that got everyone’s full attention. Jimmy stood there for a moment, looking down the long table at all of them, and when he spoke again, his tone had changed—still Jimmy, still himself, but steadier, deeper.

Scene Song: “Waiting To Exhale” Score ~ Jeffery Lewis

“When I was a little boy in the Scottish Highlands,” Jimmy began, “my life was fear. It was fear before the Rage Virus, fear during it, and fear after it. I lost my mother. I lost my sisters.

And then I was abandoned by the one man who should've protected me."

The room had gone completely still. Jimmy held his glass lightly in one hand as he went on.

"I carried that hurt into everythin'. It rotted me from the inside out. It turned me into somebody terrible, somebody cruel, somebody who did things I am not proud of and will never be proud of."

He paused there, jaw tightening for a second.

"Then, I met Kellie—formerly Jimmyink—at a time when I was too damaged and too vicious. I *hated* her once, but now..."

He looked over at Kellie with a faint half smile.

"Now I can honestly say I love her."

Kellie's face softened. Jimmy looked back around the table.

"I became an adult shaped by trauma, fear, pain, abuse, and all the infected madness of the life I survived. I formed the Jimmies. I did horrific things. Tragic things. Things that hurt people I now very much care about deeply."

His gaze moved then—to Cathy, then Tom, then George, Jane Ji, and Matthew. The look on his face changed, softer, grateful.

"And yet," he continued, "somehow, I found forgiveness among people who now mean a great deal to me."

No one moved, no one interrupted. Jimmy went on:

"I died a death that I now see as a gift. Because through death, I met the *greatest* woman of my life—my sister Sasha."

His voice warmed there.

"The woman I love more than I love myself."

Sasha's eyes shimmered immediately.

"And through her," he said, "I found a new life, one that allowed me to be fixed. Changed, and *redeemed*. She saw me when I didn't know how to see myself. She fought for the real me when I didn't know there was still a real me left to fight for."

He looked down at Sasha then, smiling warmly.

"Thanks to my sister, I was given a second chance to be *good*. To be my true self. To be able to live—truly *live*."

Jimmy paused, then looked down the table until his eyes landed on Ian.

“And when I got here—to the afterlife of Pleroma—I also found somethin’ else I’d needed my whole life and never had.”

The room stayed quiet. Jimmy’s expression softened.

“I found the father I never had. The father I wanted. The father I *should’ve* had.”

His eyes stayed on Ian fully.

“In Ian,” Jimmy added.

That hit the room hard in the best way.

“I spent my whole life wounded by the relationship I had with my biological father. I was twisted by it, starved by it. I grew up with a man who gave me fear where there should’ve been safety, abandonment where there should’ve been protection, and cruelty where there should’ve been love. So I never knew what having a real father was supposed to feel like.”

Jimmy paused a beat.

“And then I met Ian and...” Jimmy said with a faint smile before his voice trailed off.

“And every day since, I’ve felt lucky,” Jimmy continued, “lucky as hell, because somehow, after *everything*, I was *still* given what I always wanted and needed—a great father. A father who *listens*. A father who *stays*. A father who *protects* without possessin’, *guides* without breakin’, and *loves* without makin’ a weapon out of it. A father who made me feel *safe* for the *first* time in my life.”

Ian smiled and nodded as tears shimmered in his eyes.

“I don’t say that lightly,” Jimmy said, “and I don’t say it for effect. I say it because it’s *real*. Ian, you gave me somethin’ I thought was lost to me forever. You gave me the experience of bein’ somebody’s son in the way I *should’ve* been all along. I’ll *never* be able to fully explain what that means to me. But I thank you for it *every* day, even on the days I don’t say it out loud.”

Jimmy then looked around the full table again, taking all of them in.

“And I’m thankful,” Jimmy said quietly, “for every single person at this table. For the love, the forgiveness, the food, the laughter, the patience, the trust. I’m thankful that I get to sit here tonight not as the man I *was*, but as the man I *became*.”

His eyes flicked toward the candles. The food. The family. The room itself.

“I used to think my story ended in darkness, and to be honest, it *did*. But then it restarted again—*here*, in light, in warmth, and in people who love me and whom I love back.”

He raised his glass slightly.

“So here’s to being fixed, changed, and *redeemed*. Here’s to second chances. Here’s to *everybody* at this table who, *every day*, make this realm the paradise that it is. And here’s to whatever the hell comes next.”

Then, with a warm smile that made the whole thing unmistakably him:

“Howzat.”

And then he sat down, and for one beat, everyone just stared at him, almost shocked. Then the room burst into applause, real applause, warm applause, overwhelmed applause. Jimmy immediately frowned faintly with a half-smile and lifted one hand.

“All right, everyone, let’s not make it weird,” Jimmy said.

That broke the tension and sent laughter all around the table. People smiled through tears. Jackie laughed while wiping her eyes. Ian clapped Jimmy once on the shoulder. Remmick smiled. Sasha sat there openly crying and laughing at the same time. And then the room eased back into life again, food got passed, wine got poured, and Kool-Aid was refilled. People laughed louder now, like Jimmy’s speech had opened something soft and right in the air. And as the night carried on—with the tree glowing in the next room, the snow still falling outside, the house full of love and noise and food and warmth—*Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal* sat among the people who had become his *forever*, and for the first time in his existence there was no shadow hanging over the joy, no punishment hidden behind the peace, no voice waiting to tell him it would all be taken away. This was *his life* now, not the one fear had made, the one *love* had *rebuilt*. And in Pleroma, under Christmas lights and candle glow, surrounded by family, forgiveness, and the ordinary magic he had once been denied, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal *finally* got what had always been meant for him in the end: not survival, not spectacle, not power—*home*.

~ *The End* ~